

Definition of a Hero

1st Place

Chase Cain

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Grades 7 & 8

He passed away in the spring of 2006 after a twenty-five year battle with an incurable disease. He lives on in my memory as a remarkable hero and a terrific role model. It all started on a bright, warm Saturday morning. I asked my mom to take me and my batting net to practice. Baseball season was just around the corner, and I needed to loosen up. I was glad to see the deserted field, which would help with my concentration. Well, it was almost deserted. Sitting in the sun at the edge of the field was a man in a wheelchair. I could tell even from a distance that he was not only old but also very sick.

After practicing awhile, I sat down to rest on a bench near him. He looked at me, smiled, and said, “You know, if you dropped your left shoulder a bit and widened your stance a little, you might get more power on the ball.” I smiled back and trotted out to try it. It worked! I said, “Thanks,” and then my mom pulled up to take me home.

The next day I went back. I found myself hoping the old guy would be there. He was, and so began a friendship I will never forget. He asked me what I’d like to improve before the baseball season started. I said, “I sure wish I’d hurry up and get bigger and stronger.”

The next time I saw him at the field, he had a picture of a skinny kid in a football uniform and an old high school annual. The picture was of him in ninth grade. He said, “It’s not the size of the kid that counts most; it’s the size of the determination to do your best.” Then he showed me his annual. He had been first team in baseball, basketball, and football all through his high school years! He said more important than anything was his academic record: all A’s and B’s!

I kept on practicing, but I was more interested in talking. I found out he had been born in a small coalmining community. After high school, he served two years in the

Army during WW II. His unit was stationed in Iwo Jima ready to attack Japan when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima ending the war.

The next time I saw him, he had his college annual. He had graduated with a degree in chemistry. As I turned the pages, I saw that in addition to his challenging course of study, he had been on the starting team in baseball, football, and basketball all four years!

I could hardly wait for our next conversation. Many times he asked if he was boring me, and just as many times I assured him he was not. I learned that he had worked for forty-one years as an industrial chemist before he was forced to retire due to his illness. During this time he had coached Grasshopper basketball and took his team to the winner's circle many times. He had become an avid and excellent golfer also. Without emotion, he told me he had been diagnosed years earlier with an incurable, progressive, neurological condition.

At our last meeting before the first ballgame, I handed him a schedule. I tried to tell him how much his friendship meant to me. To my surprise, he said, "Would you mind if I came to some of your games?" Mind? I was beyond happy!

With what I knew was tremendous effort, he attended every home game on the schedule. When I would look across the field, he was always there in his wheelchair. Afterwards I would run over to him to ask what he thought about the game.

Eventually, he could no longer get around. He will never be recognized in textbooks or newspapers, but his efforts to be there for me make him my own personal hero. He showed me what it takes to succeed, not only in sports but also in life.

Thank you, my unforgettable friend.